

Vayetze

Upon his departure from the land of Canaan, night falls, and Jacob lays down to rest. He dreams, and in that dream, God visits him and states:

“I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you and your descendants. Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (28-13-15).

Encapsulated in this statement are the two key elements of the Divine Promise to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and now Jacob. 1) The land of Canaan will be their inheritance, and 2) their descendants will be “as the dust of the earth” (28:14).

Jacob awakes, astonished. He then declares, “If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father’s house—the LORD shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God’s abode; and of all that You give me, I will set aside a tithe for You” (vv. 20-22).

Jacob’s response is surprising because of its conditional nature. The recurrence of the word “if” is the most salient quality of the passage.

- If God remains with me...
- If He protects me...
- If I return safe to my father’s house...

The three verse statement contains three statements of conditionality.

To some, Jacob’s conditional response wreaks of distrust and lack of faith. Did not God just promise him the very things He promised his father and grandfather? To such a promise, how can a person respond conditionally as if the promise’s fulfillment is uncertain.

One can hardly imagine Abraham responding to a divine communication in this way.

I, however, happen to love Jacob’s response. I love it for two reasons. The first reason is that it expresses doubt, which I believe is crucial to a religious life. The second reason is because the content of Jacob’s conditional response is terribly mundane and does not even seem to directly respond to the divine promise that preceded it. I’ll elaborate on that more shortly.

As for the first reason, especially in Christian America, doubt is looked upon as the antithesis of faith. This is one of the reasons why we have a bifurcated society. Americans feel they need to ensconce themselves in the camp of faith or the camp of doubt, the camp of religion or the camp of science. This bifurcation appears most brazenly with the famous Scopes Trial of 1925, depicted by Jerome Lawrence in the 1955 Broadway play, *Inherit the Wind*. Scopes was a high school teacher who taught the theory of evolution in a (Dayton) Tennessee public school

provoking an uproar from Creationists across the United States, most famously three time Presidential candidate, William Jennings Bryant.

I don't need to tell you that this bifurcation between doubt and faith is still present and is at the heart of the current polarization in our society. Consider COVID: the camps of opposition cast themselves as aligned or against science. In the Jewish community, this bifurcation exists, too. Note the Haredi wedding that took place earlier this month in Brooklyn. Not only was this a very large gathering, but reportedly guests did not wear masks. Presumably, attendees believed that their faith would protect them.

What I would argue, however, and what I think Jacob's response to his dream demonstrates is that faith and doubt are not in opposition. Faith is generated and deepened through doubt, through questioning. My own life testifies to this. At critical points in my life I doubted the existence (and concern) of God. These periods of doubt were succeeded by profound experiences of affirmation and faith. Doubt, in fact, carves out a space, that can eventually be filled with faith, and this process can recur multiple times in one's lifetime. The ideal is not to be a person of faith who is immune to doubt. The true person of faith experiences a doubt that only strengthens her faith over time.

Let me clear though. Doubt does contain danger. When doubt becomes ideological, it is called skepticism. Skeptics are a kind of philosopher dating back to the time of ancient Greece. The skeptic doubts everything. Skepticism itself is often thought of as philosophy. Skepticism, in a sense, is undefeatable. One can always question reality even to the point where one can contend that we are actually brains in a vat dreaming entire existence.

This is why I always emphasize that faith was never the original Jewish category for the relationship with God. The original category was trust. Trust, unlike faith, is not intellectual; it is experiential. The skeptic must eviscerate his sense of trust to maintain the intellectual disposition of a skeptic.

So, in short, doubt is healthy and helps carve out a space for deeper and more profound faith. That's the first part of Jacob's response that I am drawn to. The second part, as I mentioned, is its mundane quality. God is talking about the distant future; the land of Canaan will become the land of Israel, and the twelve tribes of Israel will become a nation of more than 600,000 people who will stand at Sinai. Jacob brings this back down to the lived reality of the frail, vulnerable human: protection during a dangerous journey, bread to eat and clothes to wear, a safe return to his father's house. It's not that Jacob isn't interested in the future and the prophetic quality of the divine promise. What immediately concerns him are what should concern all human beings when they consider their relationship with God. A god who makes phenomenal promises about a future time but whom we are neglected by in the present is no god for us. The mundane and the extraordinary are both His domains.

Indeed, Jacob is not Abraham, but we already have an Abraham. What we need right now is a Jacob.